Guitar

An Exercise to Begin With

by Jason Vanselow

In this issue I'd like to introduce a couple of the first activities I do with guitar students, either in a one-on-one setting or in the classroom. They start the process of getting each hand doing what it needs to and getting the two hands to work together.

Single String Chromatic Scale

The first activity I call the *Single String Chromatic Scale* and it is exactly what it says it is. It's a simple chromatic scale that starts from the first fret and works all the way up to the twelfth fret and back. In the process, the student gets used to putting enough pressure on the string with the left hand and gets used to the basic right hand motions without having to think too much about musical issues.

First, place the 1st finger of your fretboard hand right behind the first fret on the first string, as close to the fret as you can get without actually touching the it, and press down. Make sure that it is the very tip of your finger that is touching the string. Now with your picking hand, play the note a few times. Make sure that you are alternating (up and down if you are using a pick, going back and forth between the index and middle fingers if you are using your fingers).

Now place 2nd finger right behind the second fret, play that note a few times to get used to it. Repeat this process with 3rd finger on the third fret and 4th finger on the fourth fret, always as close to the fret as you can get without actually being on the fret and always on the very tip of the finger.

Next, let's go back to the 1st finger on the first fret and let's play that note four times (two sets of alternations). Repeat that with fingers 2, 3 and 4 on their respective frets. Do this a few times both progressing from first to fourth fret and backwards from fourth to first. You do not need to keep all of your fingers on the strings when other fingers are playing; they can relax.

Our next step is to play our exercise from first to fourth fret (playing each note four times each) and then stop, keep 4th finger on the fret. Look at the fifth fret and move your hand so that 1st finger is on the fifth fret. Now play the exercise with 1st finger on fifth fret, 2nd finger on sixth fret, 3rd finger on seventh fret, and 4th finger on eighth fret. After doing that, stop again, keeping 4th finger on the eighth fret. Look at ninth fret and move your hand so that 1st finger is on ninth fret. Repeat the exercise with 1st finger on ninth fret, 2nd finger on tenth fret, 3rd finger on eleventh fret, and 4th finger on twelfth fret.

Now let's go backwards, again play each note four times, stay on the tips of your fingers. The shifts now happen with fourth finger taking the lead.

This exercise works on all six strings and is a really good way to begin any practice session.

After a couple of class periods this gets easier and students are ready for another challenge. So what I will do is piggyback another skill builder on the back of the previous exercise.

Ascending slurs — hammer ons

Guitar players use slurs in much the same way that orchestral string players do, however the terminology and the technique are a bit different. When executing an ascending slur on the guitar we call it a hammer on. And it's a very apt name. In order to get the sound from the string without plucking the string again with the right hand, one needs to bring the left hand finger down onto the string with quite a bit of force and velocity.

For this exercise, the student won't even need to use their right hand. We'll do the hammer on in two parts. First, prepare the finger above the string above the sixth string. I always start with the first finger hovering over the first fret. Second, bring the finger down quickly and with as much force as the student can muster onto the string in the exact same spot that you would place the finger when you are normally playing. As with normal playing, make sure that you are landing on the very tip of the finger.

Have them try it a few times with all four fingers on their own to get used to it. On the sixth string, most students will be able to make a decent sound. On some of the higher strings, they will have more difficulty.

Next I will use the format of the *Single String Chromatic Scale* to practice hammer ons. For this, you can use the same four-count format, but instead of doing four hammer ons, have the first and third counts be when the finger lands on the string, the second and fourth counts are when the finger prepares for the hammer on. You can also go up the neck to the twelfth fret using the same approach as the *Single String Chromatic Scale*.

Descending slurs — pull-offs

This same approach also works with descending slurs, which for guitar are called pull-offs. For this exercise, place first finger on the first fret of the sixth string and play that note normally (using the right hand to pluck the string). Then, before the sound dies away, pull the left hand finger off of the string so that it lands on the fretboard almost touching the next string closest to the floor. If you have ever played Tiddly Winks, the principle is the same.

Like the hammer on exercise, you can use the framework of the *Single String Chromatic Scale* to create a good pull-off exercise. Again using the four-count format, on counts one and three the student plays the note with the right hand plucking and the left hand finger on the string. On counts two and four the left hand finger pulls off of the string leaving the open string to sound. And like the original exercise, you can move this up to the twelfth fret and back.

These are simple ways to get both hands moving and working in an effective way and a good warm up to start a class or practice session. Good luck!

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